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ABSTRACT

Two areas of study in the composition field, grammar and style, have fallen below the critical and professional radar, left to the handbook writers, old-school theorists, and secondary educators. Though a few voices remain, their conspicuous absence in the scholarly journals and at professional conferences clearly suggests that the field has moved away from these matters. Yet students continue to worry about their "grammar," focus on sentence-level errors during workshops, and generally wish to have better skills in these areas. This paper suggests that not only should educators renew their interest in error, but perhaps they should find ways that students can speak to each other for mutual benefit. The paper notes that the origin of composition in this country began, in large part, due to anxiety about error--Harvard's Charles W. Eliot helped to institute the famous entrance examination in English, which put "correct spelling, punctuation, and expression, as well as legible handwriting" among those requirements to be mastered by Harvard applicants in 1872. According to the paper, now that composition has gained some measure of respect as a discipline, educators should reconsider how their expertise can help their students become less ashamed, more in control. The paper suggests these two possible strategies for getting students, then teachers, and ultimately scholars, more engaged with grammar and error: error analysis, and the concept of grammar as style. It recommends books by Mina Shaughnessy, Edward P. J. Corbett, Martha Kolln, and others as good examples to follow. (Contains 2 writing samples and 10 references.) (NKA)

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Grammar as Style: A Better Approach to the Concept of Error.

by David Edwards

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Grammar as Style: A Better Approach to the Concept of Error

Let these words wash over you for a moment: Usage. Convention. Mechanics. Correctness. Current-traditional. Product-oriented. *Grammar*. Are you still in a good mood? These terms have all come to be associated with a generally negative view of the goals of composition and writing.

Two areas of study in our field, grammar and style, have fallen below our critical and professional radar, left to the handbook writers, old-school theorists, and secondary educators, when discussed at all. Though a few voices remain, their conspicuous absence in the journals and at professional conferences such as this one clearly suggests that our field has moved away from these matters. Perhaps, as Libby Rankin proposes in her 1985 article "Revitalizing Style," we have moved away because no one "has offered us a sound, complete, and adequate theory of style" (8) nor a definitive strategy for teaching grammar. Or maybe because attention to process theory, invention, the social construction of language, and other, more modern concerns have relegated grammar and style to the unkempt basement of our House of Lore. Both theories have merit. Yet our students seem not to have gotten the message; they continue to worry about their "grammar," focus on sentence-level errors during workshops, and generally wish to have better skills in these areas. Should we tell them to give up? Or should we turn our energies toward these unresolved, yet persistent, problems? I would like to suggest that not only do we renew our interest in error, but perhaps we find ways that they can speak to each other for mutual benefit.

In 1973 an obscure compositionist wrote a slender book in which he suggests, in the preface, that "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack

control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words" (Elbow vii). Though he wasn't speaking about mechanics and grammar specifically, the underlying principle is there: a lack of control over language feels like a lack of control in other important ways. Controlling the symbols of writing to create meaning can be difficult.

Carol Kountz, a fellow student at the University of New Hampshire, wrote her 1998 dissertation on the role of shame in writing. In it, she addresses the anxiety some writers feel due to various attitudes toward written text. In the minds of some anxious writers, "The creation of error-free text can easily be conflated with the subjective perfection of style. Corrections are labor intensive and may dominate the writer's attention . . ." (116). Indeed, "Mechanical errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar can be taken to an absolute standard, and so they may illogically come to represent a personal flaw. Some writers . . . 'fetishize' rules and think they should know every rule . . ." (18).

For example, during a recent in-class workshop in my first-year composition course at UNH, small groups of students were reading and responding to early drafts. I went into the hall to get a drink of water. As I returned, a young man from one group met me in the hall to tell me about the many grammatical errors he saw in another student's essay. (Understand that I had modeled a workshop paper with the class prior to this peer workshop and had stressed the importance of attending to focus, meaning, development, and structure. My opening comments before this particular peer workshop re-emphasized that respondents should try to provide honest feedback and help the writer move forward in revision; I told them explicitly to *ignore* grammatical concerns in this workshop.) Yet this student felt it important to let me know, *in private*, how troubled he was by the errors. There were several patterns of error, primarily misuses of commas, omitted words, spacing, and so forth, and it was obvious by this impromptu

meeting that the student wanted to comment on the errors, to let his fellow student know what he was seeing and how those errors were affecting him. I told him no, to just wait, though I'm not so sure that was the best advice.

What I find most intriguing about this situation is that the student who called the meeting is the same one who wrote the first paragraph on the handout. Perceptions about error can produce student writers like #1, a student who doesn't quite control the technical aspects of writing and yet who feels shame about errors he perceives in other writers' texts. That he chose not to raise the point in front of the author—in effect, to spare him the shame and embarrassment of having his numerous errors publicized—shows how strong this tendency is among students to view error as a defect, a personal flaw.

The origin of composition in our country began, in large part, due to this type of anxiety about error. Harvard President Charles W. Eliot helped to institute the famous entrance examination in English, which put "correct spelling, punctuation, and expression, as well as legible handwriting" (Kitzhaber 34) among those requirements to be mastered by an applicant to Harvard in 1872. Twenty years later, the Harvard Reports concluded that students continued to be alarmingly deficient in basic grammatical skills. As Kitzhaber suggests, "This emphasis on superficial correctness . . . contributed in no small measure to the ideal of superficial correctness that was to dominate composition instruction for many years thereafter" (47). The "current-traditional" paradigm that came under so much attack through the 70s and 80s was so attacked because it was too focused on product, too focused on error.

Error anxiety continues to affect composition programs today, particularly as that anxiety shapes and defines the position the first-year composition course occupies in the university, particularly in those that require all undergraduates to pass such a course. As many of you,

especially WPAs, have likely heard, a college or university that requires a composition course does so because its various departments have been vocal about the quality of writing they receive from students. And more often than not, the comments about quality invariably focus on students' continued inability to write clearly, concisely, and with few surface errors. It is a complaint that never seems to go away. Try as we might to convince other departments and administrators that students learn valuable skills in our composition courses, the damning evidence continues to be the writing of students like those on the handout: students who, even after conferences, visits to the writing center, multiple drafts, and editing workshops, produce writing that is riddled with mistakes in grammar, usage, and punctuation. When schools require a composition course, they do so in part because they wish to promote the illusion of correctness in writing that has been with us for at least 150 years.

Like it or not, composition finds its ancestry in the error hunt; since the 60s, the modern field of composition has seemed obsessed with ridding itself of this stigma, concentrating more and more on those avenues that lead to disciplinary status. Surely, fussing over comma splices and dangling modifiers could not a field of study make. Now that we have gained some measure of respect as a discipline, however, we can and should reconsider how our expertise can help our students become less ashamed, more in control.

To do this, we must first determine how grammatical competence is acquired. We are already pretty sure how it is *not* acquired: through memorization of rules, worksheets, parsing, diagramming, exercises, and other "traditional" methods that attempt to explicitly teach something called "grammar" to students. Constance Weaver's Teaching Grammar in Context nicely summarizes several of the more prominent studies, the most famous of which is highlighted in Patrick Hartwell's 1985 College English article, "Grammar, Grammars, and the

Teaching of Grammar": that in 1963 a summative study by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer claimed no benefits to be gained from the formal study of grammatical rules and exercises. Yet these conclusions beg the question, How do some of us manage to learn where to put a comma when so many others do not? Having gone through elementary school in the late 70s and early 80s in Virginia, I can remember diagramming plenty of sentences from Warriner's, doing exercises, studying vocabulary sheets, finding and fixing errors in sample sentences, etc. Is this where I learned "good grammar"? These studies say no. So how did I come to have both the vocabulary of grammar and the skills of grammatical constructions in writing and revision? You might ask yourself the same.

In an article about language acquisition written in 1998, Jane Kiel examines this myth of the formally taught grammar, noting that "many older people will point out that they had grammar instruction all through school and they have a much firmer grasp of English grammar than young people today" (13). Ah, nostalgia. She goes on to suggest that, apart from the formal training in grammar, these students were also exposed to greater volumes of language in the form of talk with elders, newspapers, literature, and . . . yes . . . fewer hours spent in front of the boob tube. Her conclusion is that students learn grammar primarily through exposure to many good texts, and her order for teachers is simply to provide meaningful contexts for reading and writing and then get the hell out of the way. I wonder about this. After all, I was born in 1973 and watched, I suspect, as much television as played as many video games as any of my peers. Peter's introduction is not a lie: I'm an 80s kid and grew up with arcades, sitcoms, megaplex movie theaters, and all the other visual distractions I continue to enjoy today. So again I wonder: Am I somehow unique in all this theorizing and research? Or is there something else to learning grammatical competence?

Annie Dillard, in "Write Till You Drop," recounts this brief exchange:

> A well-known writer got collared by a university student who asked, "Do you think I could be a writer?"
>
> "Well," the writer said, "I don't know. . . . Do you like sentences?"
>
> The writer could see the student's amazement. Sentences? Do I like sentences? I am 20 years old and do I like sentences? If he had liked sentences, of course, he could begin, like a joyful painter I knew. I asked him how he came to be a painter. He said, "I liked the smell of paint." (72)

My unstudied, unresearched hypothesis to my previous question is ridiculously simple. I like sentences. And it is this pleasure with language that surely must be fostered in those students who feel shame and anxiety about language before they can learn to control the surface features of that language. True, we all acquire a level of oral competence in grammar as we learn to speak, ask questions, make demands, and so forth. But until we learn to learn to love sentences, finding the motivation to understand and employ grammar will be difficult. I suspect that my love of sentences is the main reason why I chose to learn many of the "rules" of grammar, whether through a kind of reading "osmosis," through applied study, or both.

A love of sentences. How charming. I'm imagining another of my current students right now. He wears a baseball cap most days and greets me with a loud, "Whassup Dave!" when he enters the classroom. Then he disengages and mostly doodles with a pen or watches the floor until class is over, unless I direct a question to him; most often the response is a shy smile followed by the inevitable, "I dunno." Getting him to love sentences enough to care whether a semi-colon or a dash would be preferable is going to be tough. And for students like #2 on the

handout, those who feel little or no anxiety because they do not *see* the errors in their writing without assistance, we may need to take a more active role.

Though I am certain that more research must be done and more data gathered about methodology, I can suggest at least two possible strategies for getting students, then teachers, and ultimately scholars, more engaged with grammar and error. Neither one is new, really, but I suspect neither one is much employed at the undergraduate level. Experimenting with and noting the results of these and similar methods should be our departure point for a renewal of our efforts to understand error in student writing.

Strategy #1: Error Analysis

The first method I propose for re-engaging with the hard questions of error is to look for the sources of those errors, known by most as **error analysis**. As the professionals, those to whom our friends turn instinctively when they want to know whether to use *who* or *whom*, we should make ourselves familiar with and adaptable to the variety of ways writing goes wrong. Different from the error hunt, we seek *patterns*: we seek the *logic* of error. Beginning with the safe assumption that no student writer *intentionally* commits an error that causes interference, we must then determine, with the student's help, how that error has become a habitual practice in his/her writing. No one has perhaps done this with more compassion and attention—and thus come under predictable attack—than Mina Shaughnessy. Her 1977 Errors and Expectations helped realign our perceptions of error and how we might address it in our classrooms. Her legacy is popular enough at this convention to preclude further explanation; suffice it to say that her book deserves another reading before anyone attempts this level of analysis of student writing.

Strategy #2: Grammar as Style

The second method I propose also is not new, but simply underused and underexamined as a philosophy of grammar, and that is the concept of **grammar as style**. If we are to spark in our students a burning desire to play with punctuation and revel in patterns of rhythm—even in those who seem interested only in the patterns they find in the tiles of your classroom floor—then we must develop a method and theory of grammar that can handle both the "rules" of standard written English and the many deviations from these rules that make so many of our best writers so good. We need a method for discussing why one word just seems better than another, in a given context, and then try to understand why that is so. And we need to find ways to show our students that grammar has as much to do with meaning as any idea in their heads—if not more so.

In Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, first published in 1965, Ed Corbett suggests in his section on style that "grammar and rhetoric overlap in the areas of the word, the phrase, and the clause. But although grammar and rhetoric deal with these common elements, their concern with these elements is not, strictly speaking, the same" (383). He goes on to explain that grammar should deal primarily with the description of a language, the syntax, while rhetoric is most concerned with "effectiveness" and choice. Though I understand the distinction, I wish he had not written the two definitions this way because they tend to empower style at the expense of grammar. We should teach our students to understand grammar as a description of choices as well: the ways sentences can be put together for a committee reading an application essay are different from the ways they can be put together for a reader of a novel or the reader of a love letter. Empowering our students to become aware of audiences should ultimately produce

writers who have a great deal of control over their grammatical choices, conforming to or breaking standards of written expression as they see fit. Thus, grammar as style.

As I suggested, the idea is not new. Martha Kolln, one of the few dissenting voices to speak out against the apparently final word on grammar instruction handed down by studies such as Braddock et al., offered up Rhetorical Grammar in 1991, now in its third edition. It is a good book and worth the read, though I venture that most students and some teachers will have a difficult time using it in a 15-week course: the heavy use of terminology and decontextualized exercises make it a bit intimidating, and the section on punctuation is relatively light, though the composition teacher should find it useful.

Another volume that is now regrettably out of print is Virginia Tufte's Grammar as Style (1971), from which I take my term. In it she offers hundreds of published examples of both good and bad uses of many grammatical structures, like the kernel sentence, noun and verb phrases, parallelism, etc., each with attention to the rhetorical effects of some aspect of grammar. Though there is no explicit mention of punctuation, the terminology used is rather basic and the book as a whole tends less toward linguistic analysis and more toward the literary merits of grammatical structures. What is most exciting about the book is the final chapter, "Syntactic Symbolism: Grammar as Analogue," in which Tufte shows us how writers use the syntax, punctuation, and diction at their disposal to create in language what the words themselves try to describe. It is a sort of grammatical "simulation" best shown by example, of which she provides many, like this one from Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (see handout):

> "He watched their flight: bird after bird: a dark flash, a swerve, a flash again, a dart aside, a curve, a flutter of wings" (qtd. in Tufte 234).

What we ask students to see, and later to imitate or create on their own, is the use of grammar and syntax in the service of meaning through the rhetorical options of style. Here, the punctuation and short phrases, like the birds, move erratically. We almost see them move on the page. This is control over language, folks. This is unashamed abuse of the rules for stylistic effect.

I suppose that, ultimately, I'm trying to suggest that the book has yet to be written that adequately simplifies the language of grammar for student and teacher alike, provides examples of both published and student writing for analysis, attempts to provide a rhetorical study of punctuation, eases our anxiety about error while suggesting the importance of audience expectations, and still manages to hold enough interest to initiate discussions and get students fired up about grammar. Perhaps it is too much to ask of one text, and that is why it doesn't exist. Or, perhaps, one of us has yet to write it.

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(Handout)

Writing Samples:

Student #1

Two summers ago, my girlfriend Cheryl, went down to Norfolk, Virginia with some friends for the weekend. What her friends did not tell her, was that they did not intend to come back until Wednesday. This was my chance. She had always said that she would never fly with me. I was crushed when I heard those words. Flying was my life, it was my main focus, it was one thing that I thought I could do well. So here was my opportunity to get her into an airplane.

Student #2

Nowadays more then ever, people seem to come and go very quickly. I myself am included in this energetic way of life. Power walking is one of the newest crazes in our high energy world. I noticed that among the fastest people, were many powerful and rich business executives. Is this where the term Power walking derived? It is assumed that the faster one goes now, the more affluent you have the potential down the road? Are these the types of things that leads many of us to believe that a faster pace is a necessity to achieving this financial freedom?

Passage from Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

"He watched their flight: bird after bird: a dark flash, a swerve, a flash again, a dart aside, a curve, a flutter of wings" (qtd. in Tufte 234).

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